DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 714 CG 019 101

AUTHOR Solarz, Andrea
TITLE Social Supports among the Homeless.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association (113th, Washington, DC, November 17-21, 1985). For related documents, see CG 019 099-100.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family Relationship; *Friendship; *Homeless People; *Interpersonal Relationship; Life Style; Religion; Social Isolation; *Social Networks; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

The homeless have long been considered a disaffiliated and socially isolated group. Research has indicated that most of the homeless are single and have no family relationships or friends to provide support. A study was conducted to gather information on both objective and subjective measures of social support from 125 individuals residing at a temporary shelter in a large midwestern city. Objective measures included marital status, church attendance, the number of good friends and the frequency of contact with them, and the presence of relatives and the frequency of contact with them. Subjective measures of social support were made to assess how the respondents felt about the quantity and quality of support received. While the results are generally supportive of the contention that the homeless lack social supports, they also suggest that many respondents had significant resources available to them for social support. In particular, participants were able to identify family members as providers of social support. Shelter users can be assumed to be willing to accept certain types of social support, simply by virtue of the fact that they are accepting shelter services. The homeless who remain on the street may be more likely to rely on alternatives which do not involve social interactions. Future research should examine social support among this more difficult street population. (NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED269714

Social Supports Among the Homeless

by

Andrea Solarz, M.A.
Department of Psychology
Michigan State University

CG 019101

Session: Homelessness and Mental Health
Thursday, November 21, 1985
Sponsor: Mental Health

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association, November 17-21, Washington, D.C.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Andrea Solarz

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The homeless have long been considered a disaffiliated and socially isolated group. Long before the term "social support" was coined, Sutherland and Locke (1936) discussed the isolation of the homeless from family and other groups. They noted that over half had little or no contact with their parental families, most had never married or were isolated from their spouses, and they developed few close personal relationships. Solenberger (1914) also presented data indicating that high proportions of the homeless were unmarried.

Modern researchers have continued to examine social support among the homeless. This has consisted, primarily, of gathering data on objective variables such as marital status. Research indicates that most of the homeless are single (Bassuk, et al., 1984; Ropers and Robertson, 1984; Fischer, 1984), although homeless women may be less likely to be single than are men (Crystal, 1984). Bassuk et al (1984) found that 74 percent of their sample of shelter guests had no family relationships and 73 percent had no friends to provide support. Forty-percent of the respondents reported that they had no relationships with anyone. Of those respondents who had a history of psychiatric hospitalization, 90 percent had no friends or family.

Fischer (1984) also concluded that homeless men have impoverished social networks compared to a sample of men in general households. Forty-five percent of the homeless in her study reported no contacts with friends, compared to seven percent of the general sample. Similarly, 31 percent of the homeless claimed no contacts with relatives, compared to four percent of the household men. Finally, two-thirds of the homeless had formed no confiding relationships, and none had more than two confidants. In contrast, only one-

third of the household sample had no confidants, and one quarter had three or more confidants.

One of the most comprehensive studies of social networks among the homeless was that of Cohen and Sokolovsky (1983) in their study comparing a sample of homeless Bowery men with men living in single room occupancy hotels (SROs). This study did not, however, examine subjective properties of social support systems, and its generalizability is somewhat limited because it focused only on elderly men. The researchers collected information on network size and configuration, as well as on the frequency, duration, transactional content and directionality of social networks. Cohen and Sokolovsky present a slightly more optimistic picture of the social lives of the homeless. They report that half of their homeless sample had contact with at least one kin member. In addition, although Bowery men had small networks, they had more transactions per contact than did the SRO men. However, comparisons between the two groups indicated that SRO men had more outside non-kin and kin contacts, many more contacts with females, and reported being lonely less often.

Thus, to date, research on social support systems of the homeless has been somewhat limited. Research on the quantitative aspects of social support has consistently found that the homeless have impoverished social support systems. However, little information is available on subjective aspects of social support, or on the types of social support received. In this study, information was gathered on both objective and subjective measures of social support.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 125 individuals residing at a temporary shelter in a large midwestern city.

The sample consisted of 79 males and 46 females. They had a mean age of 33.36, with a range in age of 17 to 72 years. Approximately twenty percent were under the age of 25, while fewer than three percent were over the age of 60. Nearly 21 percent of the participants were White, with the remaining being Black (78.4%) or of another ethnic background (0.8%).

Participants were randomly sampled from a roster of guests staying at the shelter on interview days. Subjects were paid $2.00 for their participation in the interview. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Measures

Measures of both objective and subjective support were obtained. Objective measures included marital status, church attendance, the number of good friends and the frequency of contact with them, and the presence of relatives in the area and the frequency of contact with them. Information was gathered on the numbers of people providing different types of social support: companionship, advice and information, practical assistance, and emotional support (see Table 1 for questions). Additional information was gathered on the gender of the individuals in the social support network and their relationship to the respondent.

Subjective measures of social support were made to assess how the respondent felt about the quantity of support received in each category of support, and how he or she felt about the quality of support received. Additional items assessed the level of reciprocity of various support relationships, and general satisfaction with personal social support networks.

Table 1

Social Support Items

Companionship:

1. Who do you usually spend time with?
2. In an average week, who do you enjoy chatting with?

Advice and Information:

1. Who can you rely on for advice or information about personal matters (for example, problems with your children, friends, or spouse; dealing with a personal situation, things like that)?
2. Who can you rely on for advice or information you need about resources; for example about finding a job or a place to say, about where to apply for welfare/food stamps, things like that?

Practical Assistance:

1. Who can you count on to be dependable when you need help?
2. Who can you count on to do a favor for your (for example, taking you someplace you need to go, loaning or giving you a small amount of money, watching your kids, loaning you something you need, etc.)?

Emotional Support:

1. Who can you count on to listen to you when you want to talk about something personal?
2. Who do you feel really cares about you?

RESULTS

Objective Measures of Social Support

Personal Relationships

Just over half of the participants (51.2%) had never married. Of those who had married, 45.9% were divorced, 37.7% were currently separated from their spouse, and 6.6% were widowed. Only 9.8% were still with their spouse. Just over a quarter (27.0%) claimed a steady romantic relationship with someone (either a spouse, girlfriend or boyfriend). There were no differences between men and women in whether or not they had a steady relationship with someone else.

Most of the participants (64.8%) had children. Eighty percent of women had children, compared to just over half (55.7%) of the men (difference significant at $p \leq .01$). However, while women were much more likely to have children than were men ($p \leq .001$), there were no differences in the number of children for men and women with children. Women were also significantly more likely than were men to have children with them at the shelter ($p \leq .001$).

The great majority of participants (81.6%) reported that they had relatives in the area. On the average, respondents indicated that they had contact with a relative approximately three to four times a month. Of those with relatives in the area, over three quarters (76.5%) had contact at least once during the previous month.

Community Activity

A large minority of participants (43.2%) indicated that they had voluntarily attended religious services during the past month, with an average attendance of three to four times.

Very few respondents (12.8%) claimed to be involved in clubs or groups. On the average, those who were involved in groups indicated that they were "fairly active" in group activities.

Network Composition

Information was gathered about several types of positive social support. Respondents were asked to indicate who provided them with companionship, with advice or information about personal or resource matters, with practical assistance, and with emotional support. In addition, participants provided information about who made their life difficult; a measure of "negative support." Additional information was then gathered about every person who was mentioned as providing some type of support. This included the relationship to the participant, their gender, and the reciprocity of the relationship. Information is presented below on several aspects of network composition.

Network Size. Scales were developed to simply indicate the numbers of people providing each type of support, and the total number of individuals providing positive social support. Up to ten names could be nominated for each of the two questions asked for each type of support, and for negative support. Thus, up to twenty names could be given for each type of support, or a possible total of 80 positive supporters if no names were given more than once.

Scale scores are presented in Table 2. Overall, respondents indicated that they had relatively small social support networks. Participants named an average of 6.0 supporters across all types of social support, with a range of zero to 24 total supporters. On the average, participants named the greatest number of supporters for emotional support (3.35), followed by the number of supporters for companionship (2.89). The fewest number of supporters were indicated for advice and information (2.06). It should be noted that just over ten percent of the participants claimed to have no positive supporters in all categories.

Table 2

Number of People Providing Each Type of Support

Companionship - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 2.89

Advice and Information - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 2.06

Practical Assistance - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 2.24

Emotional Support - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.35

Total Number Positive Supporters - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 6.02

An average of approximately fifteen percent of the members of each network were "negative supporters." Of those, just over a third (37.0%) provided both positive and negative support. Conversely, over 85 percent of the individuals on each network provided only positive support.

Specialists versus Generalists. Another way of looking at social support is to examine whether supporters are "specialists" or "generalists." Specialists provide only one type of support, while generalists may provide several types of support. For example, a Social Services worker might be an advice and information specialist on whom the respondent might depend to find out about shelters in the area. On the other hand, a good friend might be a generalist who provides emotional support and companionship, and who can be depended upon to do a favor.

In this study, supporters were coded as specialists if they provided only one type of support. If they provided more than one type of support, they were coded as generalists. Scales were then constructed to indicate the percentages of supporters in each category who were specialists versus generalists. Overall, networks were made up of half specialists and half generalists. Within categories, the highest percentage of specialists was indicated for companionship (37.3%). This was followed by the percentage of specialists for emotional support (29.7%), practical assistance (24.7%), and advice and information (21.3%). (These scores for categories were calculated only on those cases where supporters were named; i.e. where the denominator was greater than zero.)

Relationship of Supporter. Information was gathered on the type of relationship between each person named on the network and the participant. This information was then coded to indicate whether the supporter was a member of the respondent's nuclear family (parent, spouse, sibling, or child), another type of relative, a friend, or in an "other" relationship category.

The percentages of the total network made up of each of these types of supporters were then calculated.

The greatest percentage of supporters (45.5%) were nuclear family members. Another 9.4 percent of supporters were other relatives. Thus, an average total of 54.9% of network members were relatives. Friends also constituted a sizeable proportion of networks (29.1%). The remaining sixteen percent of persons in the networks included professionals such as therapists and counselors, acquaintances, landlords, and other such persons.

Women tended to have a higher proportion of nuclear family members in their networks than did men (54.4% versus 39.8%; $p \leq .05$). There were no differences between men and women in the percentages of their networks made up of friends or "other" members.

The gender of each person named in the network was also recorded. On the average, 54.6% of network members were female, with the remaining 45.4% being male. This difference was not significant.

Subjective Measures of Social Support

Subjective information was gathered to indicate the levels of satisfaction with various aspects of social support, and to measure the reciprocity of the exchange of support in relationships. These results are described below.

Reciprocity of Support

For each person named in their network, respondents were asked to indicate whether the other person provided more support, whether the exchange of support was equal, or whether the participant provided more support in the relationship. These scores were then aggregated across all supporters to provide a distribution of the percentages of each of these types of relationships in each network. On the average, equal amounts of support were

provided in nearly half (46.5%) of the relationships in each network. In a large minority of relationships (37.4%), more support was provided by the supporter than by the respondent. In the smallest proportion of cases (16.1%), the respondent indicated that he or she provided more support than did the other person. Thus, respondents felt that they were receiving at least as much support as they were giving in the large majority of their relationships.

Support Ratings

Participants rated how they felt about the quantity and quality of each category of social support. In addition, they provided an overall rating of their social support. Ratings were made on a 7-point scale from "delighted" to "terrible."

Average scale scores for satisfaction with each type of support are shown in Table 3. For the most part, participants felt "mostly satisfied" to "mixed" about the quality and quantity of each type of social support. An average score of 3.39 also indicates that respondents felt mostly satisfied to mixed about the quantity and quality of their overall social support. It should be noted that while most respondents were relatively satisfied with their social support, almost a quarter (23.2%) felt "mostly dissatisfied," "unhappy," or "terrible" about the social support which they received.

Ratings for each category of support were significantly correlated with overall ratings of social support at $p \leq .001$. Correlations ranged from a low of .38 between ratings for the quality of companionship and overall support, to a high of .66 between ratings of the amount of emotional support and overall support.

The relationships between overall ratings of social support and a number of other variables were also examined. Overall ratings of social support were significantly related to the number of close friends ($r = .28$; $p \leq .001$), and

Table 3

Social Support Satisfaction Ratings

Companionship:

Quantity - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.59

Quality - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.38

Advice and Information:

Quantity - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.05

Quality - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.11

Practical Assistance:

Quantity - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.46

Quality - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.28

Emotional Support:

Quantity - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.34

Quality - - - - - - - - - - - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.10

Overall quality and quantity of social support - - - - $\bar{X}$ = 3.39

Scale:

1 = delighted (extremely pleased)
2 = pleased
3 = mostly satisfied
4 = mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)
5 = mostly dissatisfied
6 = unhappy
7 = terrible

to the total number of positive supporters ($r = .27$; $p \leq .001$). These ratings were also significantly related to the percentage of relationships in the network where the exchange of support was equal ($r = .18$; $p \leq .05$), but not to the percentages of relationships where one person provided more support than did the other.

Overall ratings of social support were not related to number of children, whether the participant had a steady romantic relationship, church attendance, amount of contact with relatives, or how often the participant had contact with the most important person in his or her network.

DISCUSSION

Past research has indicated that the homeless have very deficient social support networks. This study presents an indepth assessment of the social networks of guests of a temporary shelter. While the results of this research are generally supportive of the contention that the homeless lack social supports, it also suggests that many of those in the study had significant resources available to them for social support. In particular, participants in this study were able to identify family members as providers of social support.

The results of this study are certainly less dreary than the findings of Bassuk, et al. (1984) who reported that three-quarters of their participants had no family relationships or friends to provide support; or those of Fischer (1984) who reported that one-third of those in her study had no contacts with relatives and that 45 percent had no contacts with friends. Nonetheless, the support networks of the individuals in this study were clearly not strong enough to prevent participants from resorting to staying in a temporary shelter. Even when social support is provided or is available, a lack of other more tangible resources, such as money or enough room to accommodate

another family member, can overcome the positive effects which social support may have in helping people to maintain themselves in the community under stressful conditions.

As in most studies of the homeless, participants in this study were guests of a temporary shelter. Caution should be used before generalizing results based on this population to the homeless as a whole. Shelter users are likely not representative of all homeless, particularly those who make a deliberate choice not to use these types of facilities. Shelter users can be assumed to be willing to accept certain types of social support, simply by virtue of the fact that they are accepting shelter services. Those who remain on the street may be more likely to rely on alternatives which do not involve social interactions. Shelter users are a much more accessible group for study, and certainly constitute a sizeable and important portion of the homeless. However, future research is encouraged using more difficult homeless populations. This information may be necessary to facilitate the provision of services to this group which are acceptable to them.

REFERENCES

Bassuk, E., Rubin, L., & Lauriat, A. (1984). Is homelessness a mental health problem? American Journal of Psychiatry, 141, 1546-1550.

Cohen, C. & Sokolovsky, J. (1983). Toward a concept of homelessness. Journal of Gerontology, 38, 81-89.

Fischer, P. (1984, August). Health and social characteristics of Baltimore homeless persons. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto.

Ropers, R. & Robertson, M. (1984, January). The inner-city homeless of Los Angeles: An empirical assessment. Paper presented at the Growing with the Needs of the Homeless Forum, sponsored by the Los Angeles County Task Force for the Homeless, Los Angeles.

Solenberger, A. (1914). One Thousand Homeless Men. (2nd ed.). New York: Sage.

Sutherland, E. & Locke, H. (1936). Twenty thousand homeless men: A study of unemployed men in the Chicago shelters. Chicago: J.B. Lippincott.